

Tatiana Savoia Landini¹

NORBERT ELIAS AND FIGURATIONAL SOCIOLOGY: INTERVIEW WITH STEPHEN MENNELL

This issue of *Sociologia & Antropologia* contains a set of texts based on Norbert Elias's figurational sociology. The interview preceding the articles was conducted with Stephen Menzell¹, professor emeritus at University College Dublin in Ireland and honorary professor at the University of Leicester in England, in which Elias himself was a professor in the 1950s and 1960s. He holds a master's degree in economics from the University of Cambridge and a PhD from the University of Amsterdam. Stephen taught at Harvard (USA), Exeter (England), and Monash (Australia) universities before establishing himself as a professor in Dublin in 1993.

Stephen Menzell devoted his career to translating, publishing, and researching Elias's work. His research includes *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present* (1985) and *The American Civilizing Process* (2007). A commentator and interpreter of Elias's work, his book *Norbert Elias: An Introduction*² (1992) is an important source not only for students but also for more experienced researchers venturing into Elias's work. Some other works worth mentioning for their importance to understanding Elias include *The Norbert Elias Reader: a biographical selection* (with Johan Goudsblom, 1998); *Norbert Elias on Civilization, Power and Knowledge* (with Johan Goudsblom, 1998); and *Norbert Elias*, four volumes composing the *Collection Sage Masters of Modern Social Thought* (with Eric Dunning, 2003). In early 2022, *Civilisations, Civilising Processes and Modernity – a debate, documents from the Conference at Bielefeld, 1984* (Bogner & Menzell, 2022) was released, a book containing transcriptions of presentations, responses, and interventions made at this important conference, to which Michel Foucault had confirmed his presence³.

Mennell had his first contact with Elias's writings in the 1970s during his stay in Exeter, shortly after teaching at Harvard at a time when Parsons and his sociology reigned there. Invited to assist in the translation of *Introduction to Sociology* into English, he says he was then "sucked" by the brilliance of *Game Models*, a chapter in which interdependence is presented as a central notion for sociological analysis. Having lived very closely to Elias since then, his most audacious editorial venture was publishing Norbert Elias's collected works in English, which included translating previously unpublished texts and carefully revising previous translations (*Collected Works of Norbert Elias*, 18 volumes, UCD Press, 2005 to 2014). Stephen Mennell was also a board member of the Norbert Elias Foundation from 1997 to 2017, when the three members then decided to "pass the torch," using Elias's own metaphor, to members of a new generation. Enthusiastic and agglutinating, in his 20 years as an advisor to the Norbert Elias Foundation he intensely toiled to disseminate Elias's work and, in its continuity, to encourage academic debates and theoretical-empirical research.

In the following interview, we find a substantial balance of figurational sociology, its reception, and diffusion. Thus, Mennell aligned questions and theoretical positions which, at some moments, are provocative, as when, for example, he refers to Elias's opposition to the supremacy of philosophy over the empirically based social sciences, a position which effectively paves Elias's path toward developing his theory of society.

In his youth, still a secondary student, Elias showed great interest in reading the German Classics – books composing the *Bibliographisches Institut* collection of German classics, Schiller, Goethe, etc. (Elias, 2001; Korte, 2017; Mennell, 1992) was his suggestion for his *bar mitzvah* gift. Still a high school student, he took part in a Kant reading group. He chose philosophy and medicine as his university courses. He studied both for a few years at the University of Breslau, gradually giving up medicine due to the overload it represented. In addition to Breslau, he attended one semester in Heidelberg and another in Freiburg. He obtained his doctorate in philosophy in 1924, with the thesis *Idea and individual: a critical investigation of the concept of history* (Elias, 2006a) after intense dispute with his advisor for questioning the Kantian *a priori* ⁴.

A PhD in philosophy, Elias arrived at Alfred Weber and his *Privatdozent* Karl Mannheim's sociology seminars at the end of 1924, "possessing only rudimentary knowledge of sociology but had a biography which provided him with the necessary preconditions to enter into the intellectual discussions of the Heidelberg sociologists." (Korte, 2017: 66). If Elias had company in rebelling against Neo-Kantians' idealism, individualism, and neglect of concrete realities, he took a different path from many of his contemporaries, embarking on a journey of total rejection of philosophy (Kilminster, 2006: XIV), which he understood as a form of non-empirical speculation (Kilminster

ter, 2014a: 26). By tracing the sociogenesis of economics and sociology, he establishes the use of empirical data as a decisive change in the transition from a pre-scientific approach to a more scientific way of looking at society (Elias, 2006b). His rejection of philosophy then means that epistemological, ontological, and ethical questions appear transformed into sociological language, related to each other in a theory of society (Kilminster, 2014a: 32).

In these bases, our interviewee proposes to think of Elias's sociology of knowledge as one of his greatest contributions. Elias's sociology is, in Dunning and Hughes (2013:73), *radically processual and radically relational*. The concept of figuration, which begins to take shape in his first works – *The Court Society*, written as a qualification thesis in Heidelberg, left undefended due to Elias's departure from Germany in 1933; *The Society of Individuals*⁵, written in 1939 and initially intended to be published as part of *The Civilizing Process*; and *The Civilizing Process* – are opposed to sociological conceptions advocating society as structures outside individuals, and individuals simultaneously surrounded by and separated from society, a conception called and rejected by Elias as *homo clausus*.

Thus, that science does not sprout from the mind of an idealized subject is part of Elias's sociology of knowledge. It understands it as a “social and collective endeavour, consisting of sets of social institutions located within a particular process of social development”. A complementary characteristic of his sociology of knowledge is its emphasis on the historical development of human knowledge, as well as a discussion about the greater or lesser “object adequacy” of human knowledge, lying at some point between “involvement” and “detachment.” (Van Krieken, 1998: 137). Therefore, this proposition is integrated into the theory of civilizing processes, thus implying that knowledge is processually understood. Its base dates back to his doctoral thesis in philosophy, from which point Elias redirected his path to sociology.

Figuration and process are the two founding principles of Elias's sociology (Landini, 2013). This analytical instrument directs its look to interdependence relations – and, thus, to power relations –, relations which are always in transformation, in process. Elias was troubled by the label *historical sociology*, precisely considering that knowledge of history was not among his main objectives, but rather the understanding of *time* as an essential element for comprehending both the present and the past. The analysis of specific figurations, whether more restricted or broader, seen either in a shorter or longer time, focuses on the *structure of social changes*, differing from Marxist sociology whose view is more focused on *changes in the social structure*. This is a point which also distances Elias from Bourdieu, as Mennell points out in his answers, despite the important confluences or congruences between both sociologies.

Eliasian sociology is now internationally referred to as *figurational sociology*. As if considering it historical sociology would divert attention from one of the central points of his theory, it is important to point out that even

the label of figurational sociology is incomplete – what Elias presents us is a figurational and processual sociology⁶. Though one concept may have prominence over another in specific studies, and Elias himself gives more attention to one or the other in his own studies, it is impossible to lose sight of the perspective that figurations are always in process and that understanding the *structure of social changes* takes place from the study of figurations.

I began my conversation with Prof. Mennell asking about figurational sociology and Elias's influence and legacy. To his long and consistent answer, I would like to add a few words about Elias's presence in Brazilian sociology and social sciences.

Norbert Elias became more accessible to Brazilian readers in the early 1990s when translations of his most recognized works were progressively published: *The Civilizing Process* (1990, vol 1) (1993, vol. 2); *The Society of Individuals* (1994); *Mozart* (1994); *The Court Society*; *The Germans* (1997); and *The Established and the Outsiders* (2000). Since then, interest in the author seems to have grown a lot. However, I allow myself a provocation: I would say that Elias is largely presented in undergrad social sciences courses as an auxiliary author in sociology of culture, sociology of violence, and discussions about the State. Other “schools” are not only more numerous, but especially more renowned – Bourdiesian, Foucauldian, systemic, critical, etc. Comparatively, there are few dissertations and theses in sociology, anthropology and political science proposing to have figurational sociology as their theoretical orientation⁷. Eliasian or *Figurational Sociology* does not seem to attract so many adherents, despite the growing partial use of concepts and references to some of his books.

I place this thematic issue in this spirit of discussing figurational sociology and the possibilities it opens to the understanding of the contemporary world. In addition to the interview addressing issues related to the theory of civilizing processes and understandings about decivilizing processes, among others, this issue of *Sociologia & Antropologia* contains an article reflecting on Norbert Elias's theoretical proposition and two others discussing contemporary issues.

We also find, in the interview and in the articles, discussions on the political implications of Eliasian sociology, which, according to Mennell, tends to be identified with traditions more to the left in the political spectrum due to its analytical emphasis on interdependence chains and power balances between individuals and groups. Toward this, Jason Hughes discusses the critical potential of the concept of figuration, whereas the other two texts debate highly controversial topics today – gender, populist governments, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first article, *Fields, worlds and figurations: using Elias to revisit depth conceptual imagery and emancipatory critique*, authored by Jason Hughes, André Saramago, Michael Dunning, and Kahryn Hughes, seeks, in Elias, conceptual

tools to address the current challenge of political positioning and interventions by sociologists/social scientists. Consistent with Stephen Menzell's last response in the interview, the authors also explain some implicit values in figurational sociology and analyze possibilities for positioning and interventions, facing the recurrent criticism to Elias that his sociology would lack critical or emancipatory potential.

The path to this discussion has as its starting point a comparison between *field*, *world*, and *figuration*, conceptual imageries used by Bourdieu, Becker, and Elias – which, in itself, is already an important theoretical contribution. Ideas of *depth*, and the critically realist understandings of 'deep causal mechanisms', serves to question and compare those three concepts. If Bourdieu shares the premises of critical realism, Becker and Elias are accused of using flat ontologies lacking depth and critical potential. Critiquing the critical, the authors raise the limitations of approaches seeking the *depth* of social reality, showing their weaknesses in apprehending the fluidity and dynamics of social processes, which may jeopardize their understanding of the social world. It is from this theoretical framework that they seek possibilities of emancipatory policies in figurational sociology, discussing the concepts of *detour via detachment* and *secondary involvement* as a basis for interventions in the sphere of human figurations.

Resuming the criticism that figurational sociology would adopt an emotionally and politically distanced perspective, already commented on both in the interview and by Hughes et al., Florence Delmotte faces this criticism by discussing a theme which has been heatedly addressed by contemporary social sciences: sexual discrimination and gender inequalities.

To date gender relations have, in general, been addressed by figurational sociology from two theoretically related perspectives: the conceptual pair "established and outsiders" and the discussion about the civilizing process and changes in behaviors and good manners. In *Norbert Elias and women: life, texts, and new perspectives on gender issues*, Delmotte presents a very careful reading of the texts and extracts in which Elias talks about women or relationships between the sexes. More importantly, from this reading, involving discussions on transformations in sensitivities, the emancipatory role of law and rights, and the already identified long-term trend of increasing individualization and its consequences to understanding identity, Delmotte shows other possibilities from figurational sociology for research on gender relations and advancements in knowledge of social reality.

From one of the controversial discussions on figurational sociology – on processes of civilization, their interruptions or even decivilization processes –, John Pratt and Daisy Lutyens reflect on populist governments and the COVID-19 pandemic. Unlike governments which sought to alleviate economic and social problems caused by health measures used to control the spread of the disease, populists Donald Trump in the U.S. and Jair Bolsonaro

in Brazil explored the turbulence caused by the pandemic to belittle science, life, and rights. Tracing the sociogenesis of contemporary populism and its subsequent impact on the post-1945 trajectory of the Anglo-American world and writing at a time in which the pandemic was more out of control and vaccines had not even been approved, the authors argue that the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic would have weakened populist attacks, at the same time that it would have assisted in rejuvenating the civilizing process.

Like Nathalie Heinich (2020), who, at the beginning of the pandemic in April 2020, wrote a very optimistic text about the possible positive effects of the pandemic toward greater recognition of the interdependencies between individuals and groups, Pratt and Lutyens also show a scenario of possible civilizational gains. Living in a country ruled by Bolsonaro, my own vision, published in a previous issue of *Sociologia & Antropologia* (Landini, 2021), follows in the opposite direction, i.e., that we have not had civilizing gains arising from these hard years of 2020 and 2021, despite a possible decrease in popular support for Bolsonaro's government. Pratt and Lutyens' article, however, goes beyond this perhaps more specific point, showing a relevant theoretical contribution to thinking the meanings and dynamics of civilization processes. In Elias's sense, the civilizing process acquires an often counterintuitive definition, and the authors show important elements that may help us focus on our own country and deepen the debate about the consequences of a pandemic that has overlapped an extremely complex political scenario.

The interview follows below, conducted by e-mail in September 2020 and reviewed by the interviewee in March 2022. Enjoy your reading!

INTERVIEW WITH STEPHEN MENNELL*

Tatiana Savoia Landini Professor Mennell, thank you very much for taking your time for this interview about Norbert Elias and figurational sociology. I would like to start by asking you about Elias's influence in the sociological field. How do you see the spread and influence of figurational sociology in recent decades? What do you consider to be Elias's most important legacies to sociology?

Stephen Mennell Your first question, about the spread of Elias's influence, is difficult to answer with great precision. One thing is clear: the first generation of us who came strongly under Elias's personal influence has begun to thin out. My close friends Eric Dunning and Johan (Joop) Goudsblom have both died in the last two years. I myself am now in my late 70s and must now begin to rate as a Grand Old Man! Many members of the great "Amsterdam School" that formed around Joop in the late 1960s and 1970s are about my age too, and our contemporary Pieter Spierenburg, the internationally reno-

wined historian of violence, also died in 2019. But this is just a natural process, to be set against the social process of the diffusion of Elias's influence, both geographically and between generations. In fact, Norman Gabriel and I (Gabriel & Mennell, 2011) edited a book specifically devoted to "passing on the torch" to a new generation of "figurational" sociologists.⁸ And certainly the international "figurational family" (as Cas Wouters first called it) has been immensely active in research, conferences and teaching; Barbara Górnicka, Katie Liston and I wrote a survey to mark the 25th anniversary of Elias's death (Górnicka et al., 2015), but it is no longer possible – even with the help of modern services like Academia.edu and ResearchGate.net, to keep track of every use that is being made of Elias's work. Above all, there has been geographical diffusion to every continent, most impressively to you yourselves in Latin America. We, members of the original little circle in Germany, the Netherlands, and Britain, no longer need to think of ourselves as "we few, we happy few" on whom it was incumbent to fight the academic battle of Agincourt. At the same time, the number of us who actually knew Elias personally is dwindling.

In short, "figurational sociology" has grown into a major international research tradition. But one should not exaggerate, there are many other "schools of thought" which have more numerous followers.

One other thing should be mentioned: nearly all textbooks on the history of sociological thought, or on key sociological theorists, now include a discussion of Elias. Considering that when I first met Elias in 1972 scarcely anyone seemed to know of him apart from those who had come into contact with him personally, his profile in the textbooks is astonishing. Many of them depict him as "the last of the classical sociologists." I feel ambivalent about that. I don't like it if it implies that Elias is just another historical figure in the endless sequence of fads and fashions that afflicts sociological theory – for me, Elias is someone to be taken as a practical influence on the way we do sociology now and in the future. On the other hand, I do like the label of "classical sociologist" if it signifies the sheer breadth of Elias's intellectual horizons, because too much of present-day sociology seems to have become far narrower in its academic ambitions. Too often, sociologists appear content to apply their technical skills – which have indeed advanced immensely in the last half-century – to tasks set them by politicians and policymakers, the people who control the sources of the money that is increasingly necessary for that kind of research.

Which leads into your second and more substantial question, about Elias's most important legacies to sociology. There are several closely interconnected threads in my answer.

First, better than any other sociologist I know of, Elias circumvents all those endless, pointless discussions of the misleading static polarities: individual and society, agency and structure, micro and macro. They are all re-

lated to each other and they are all extremely difficult to eliminate from sociological discourse. The way to do it is always to think in a radically *processual* way, as Elias did. It is not easy for everyone to get the hang of thinking in that way, especially if they have been brought up in conventional mainstream sociology; perhaps it was a little easier for me because I had been trained as an economist.⁹

I was first bowled over by Elias when I was translating chapter 3 of *Was ist Soziologie?*, on the “Game Models.” Only quite recently, I had spent the year 1966–67 at Harvard, sitting at the feet of Talcott Parsons, who, for two or three decades, had been the dominant “theorist” in world sociology – dominant to an extent that no one has matched since – and he had in effect spent his career struggling with these interconnected static polarities. Though I found him personally likeable, I had come to the conclusion that poor “TP” had been wasting his time, that his approach was a dead end, and, moreover, that his elaborate scaffolding of concepts did not do much to generate fruitful research ideas. The Game Models, in contrast, were a revelation. Their central point is that this mythical substance “agency” is a function of changing power ratios within chains of social interdependence (from birth onwards). They go on to show how, as the number of participants increases and/or as the power ratios become relatively more equal, the more the course of social processes becomes relatively more unplanned and relatively less the outcome of individual intentions as they appear to individuals who imagine themselves to be sovereign authors of their own lives. (I have often made the point that changes in the opposite direction, towards greater power inequalities, may be expected to produce opposite results – though this has been less explored in the literature). The Game Models also have many other wider implications, for the “means of orientation,” sociology of knowledge and ideologies, and for sociological concept-formation and research methods. Yet – and I still find this astonishing – few sociologists seem to have grasped the profound implications of the models. That is probably because they are not couched in the abstract, “philosophoidal” – a nice contemptuous word invented by Elias – way that is *de rigueur* for today’s “social theorists.”

A major legacy is Elias’s attempt to lift sociology from under the dead hand of philosophy. One of the intellectual aims running through his career is to convert ancient philosophical problems into empirically researchable sociological ones; I sometimes think that recent “social theorists” have the opposite aim, to convert empirical–theoretical sociological questions back into ancient, often transcendental, philosophical ones. The knee-bending deference of sociologists to philosophers continues almost unabated. Elias (2009a: 107-160) offers a sociological explanation for this in his essay on “Scientific establishments,” where he adapts the theory of established–outsiders relations – first developed in the context of community studies (Elias & Scotson, 2008) – to the field of sociology of knowledge and the sciences.

His explanation, to simplify greatly, is that the pecking order in the prestige of disciplines within the modern university is closely related to their age: how long it is since each of them evolved as empirical–theoretical disciplines out of the protoplasm that was once all called just “philosophy.” The natural sciences evolved more or less in the order described in Auguste Comte’s theory of “hierarchy of the sciences” (Comte, 1830-1842),¹⁰ though the theory needs to be expanded to cover the emergence of the humanities and social sciences – philology and history in the hermeneutic revolution of the early nineteenth century, and economics, political science, anthropology and sociology in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Sociology was a relative latecomer, and there are few disciplines for us to look down upon, apart from media studies. As for philosophy, it remains as an empty husk after the empirical–theoretical sciences have grown out of it, and yet, it retains a great deal of prestige from its past.

Among my own generation of Elias’s followers, Richard Kilminster (2007) has done most to develop the critique of philosophoidal ways of thinking, and to promote a “post-philosophical sociology.”¹¹ Of course, Elias did not reject the whole corpus of philosophy, and would have recognised the need to be well read – as he was himself – in the history of philosophy, as one important element in the development of humans’ thinking about their own social existence. But he would certainly reject the right of philosophers to “legislate,” as they often have, on the character, theory, and methods of social scientific research. He found much to admire in the enlightened writings of Kant, for example, at the same time as repeatedly denouncing his epistemology, which he saw as an important staging post in the quite erroneous central Western epistemological tradition that ran from Descartes through Kant to the logical positivists and Karl Popper in Elias’s own lifetime. It was erroneous because Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum* was not the best place from which to start, in solipsistic doubt about everything except one’s own existence. To ask “How do I know?” now looks as an unpromising starting point because today it is taken for granted that everything that any single individual knows has been learned, since birth, *from other human beings* with whom he or she is interdependent. Furthermore, Descartes began not just with a *single* isolated mind, but from a single isolated *adult* mind. Once that is recognised, the central problem of the theory of knowledge is *no more* problematic than how, from birth onwards, children learn and use the symbolically transmitted fund of knowledge of all kinds, and themselves become adult minds and personalities. It is also *no less* problematic; but somehow the great edifice of Western philosophy seems less imposing when put on a par with the humble, though highly productive and rapidly expanding, field of developmental psychology.

The ancient philosophical prison – which indeed may date back to before Descartes to Plato’s prisoners in the cave – has infected too much of

sociology. Elias endlessly criticised this current as *homo clausus* thinking – thinking in terms of the “closed person” looking out, the inherent properties of whose mind shape what it is possible to know about “the world out there.” On the contrary, Elias argues that the *homo clausus* way of experiencing the world should be seen as a particular *mode of self-experience* that came to greater prominence among, at first, limited groups of intellectuals during the Renaissance and gradually spread more widely through modern European society. Today, it is a little better understood that the *homo clausus* mode of self-experience is not at all an eternal human universal. A recent book by Julian Baggini (2018), himself a philosopher, makes this point in a refreshing way. Though, of course, he did not refer to Elias, he emphasised that Chinese and other Eastern philosophies are less individualistic and more concerned with “the way” rather than “the truth.”

At first glance, it may be difficult to see how Popper fits into the epistemological tradition of thought that Elias vehemently criticised. Later works by Popper (1972), notably *Objective Knowledge*, appear to recognise the social processes involved in the growth of knowledge. As a young man, not long after I first met Elias, I once had the temerity to suggest to him that the distance between his own theory of the growth of knowledge and the sciences and Popper’s was not very great. The effect was explosive!¹² I later came to understand the differences more clearly through Elias’s (2009b: 161-190, 2009c: 191-211) own two essays about Popper and Popperism (if that word exists). Central to his objections is the underlying assumption, in Popper (and the logical positivists), that, although the content of knowledge may grow and change, the underlying logic of scientific knowledge was unchanging, eternally valid, and universal. Elias concentrated his fire on Popper’s early book *Logik der Forschung*, where that doctrine is especially clear, but when one looks carefully under notions like “World 3” in *Objective Knowledge*, it is still there. Elias’s (2014: 53-130) critique of the idea of a single, unchanging logic is also strongly developed in a little-known paper, unpublished at the time of his death, to which we gave the title “Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and ‘the question of the logical unity of humankind.’” Lévy-Bruhl, and anthropologists such as Rodney Needham, may be seen as having long anticipated Baggini. But Elias also wrote at considerable length in this rather rambling typescript about a far earlier figure still, Aristotle, showing that Aristotle’s logic – often seen as the forerunner of Western philosophical logic – is very far from the same as modern logic.

Besides those rather abstruse issues, Elias appears to have positively hated Popper for the damage his influence had done to sociology and the social sciences (Kilminster, 2014b: 162; Mennell, 2018a). Popperians, inside as well as outside sociology, were notorious in seeking to legislate – from philosophical principles – what constituted good sociology and valid theory. Moreover, the effect of Popper’s (1945, 1957) two famous books, *The Open Society and its Enemies* and *The Poverty of Historicism*, seems to have been to deter many

sociologists from using historical evidence in their sociological research, or to encourage them to treat it as no more than background scenery rather than as a constituent part of their sociological explanations. Popper dedicated *Poverty of Historicism* to the “memory of the countless men and women of all creeds or nations or races who fell victim to the fascist and communist belief in Inexorable Laws of Historical Destiny.” He probably did not intend these books to have the effect that they did: he saw himself as a Social Democrat and advocate of modes “social engineering” as opposed to “historical prophecy.” But their practical effect, especially in British sociology, was to put rocket boosters under what Elias (2009d: 107-126) called “the retreat of sociologists into the present.” In other words, Popper’s influence helped to take sociology in precisely the opposite of Elias’s preferred direction.¹³

Certainly among Elias’s principal legacies is his sociological theory of knowledge. In my view, the most important thing to read about this is the collection of his essays on the sociology of knowledge and *the sciences* (note the plural, on which Elias insisted) that Richard Kilminster and I (Kilminster & Mennell, 2009) edited as *Essays I*, the fourteenth volume of the *Collected Works*. Most of those essays date from the 1960s and 1970s. That they were widely scattered among various journals prevented them from becoming better known. Somewhat better known is the book *Involvement and Detachment* (Elias, 2007), although its title may lead the unwary to assume that it is another tedious disquisition on the Weberian theme of *Wertfreiheit* or “objectivity.” The first of its two main essays dates from 1956 but the second, “The Fishermen in the Maelstrom” (from 1982 and taking its title from a short story by Edgar Allen Poe), is arguably more important. It develops the idea that the accumulation of practical knowledge through observation and theoretical reflection is ill-served by high levels of everyday danger. So, the dramatic acceleration in the progress of science has been intertwined with diminution of fear and fantasy, as life in society – some societies anyway – has become safer and more predictable.

These two books – *Involvement and Detachment* and *Essays I* – need to be read together. Particularly important, I think, is that each level of the sciences has come to need its own mode of theory and explanation. Traditional philosophers of science like Popper took physics as the ideal of “good theory,” and, in consequence, many social scientists came to suffer from a sense of inferiority or “physics envy.” Elias, however, argues that classical physics produced essentially “three dimensional” theories like Boyle’s Law, marked by “billiard ball causality” and reversibility. The biological sciences, however, already produced four-dimensional theories, in which time as well as space are necessary dimensions; and most biological processes, whether in the development of particular organisms or in evolution, are irreversible. Finally, Elias proposes, theories in the social sciences are five-dimensional. The fifth dimension is *experience*. People’s knowledge and perception of the social pro-

cesses in which they are caught up is an essential dimension in explaining their course. Most of those processes, moreover, are potentially reversible.

Philosophers find it hard to understand the radical consequences of Elias's sociology of knowledge. They tend to see themselves as *legislators*, with a sense of being above the discourse of mere mortals. Elias, and Karl Mannheim before him, land the killer blow by arguing that only sociology can provide an explanation of philosophical standpoints. Philosophical concepts are inadequate for explaining how modes of orientation develop. They fail to get at the issues that Elias repeatedly emphasised, including power relations and power struggles. Philosophers perhaps come into their own when analysing concepts and their contested meaning. But when they engage in substantive debates about the good life or society, they usually fail to address prior questions about the sociology of knowledge. The sociology of knowledge rules out the possibility of *starting* from philosophy or philosophical modes of orientation.¹⁴

I have been teasing you: so far, I have made no mention at all of the one book by Elias (2012b) that everyone has heard of, his 1939 masterpiece *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, or *On the Process of Civilisation*.¹⁵ I want to be provocative and argue that it should be seen merely as a case study! Of course, it is a very great work, and it has come to serve as the paradigm – in exactly T. S. Kuhn's sense – for a whole research tradition. It serves as a model of just the kind of five-dimensional theory that Elias advocated. It does not mean that every piece of “figurational” or “process-sociological” research has to have a time horizon of a millennium like *On the Process of Civilisation*, let alone the many millennia of some of Elias's later writings, but *time* is always a key element.¹⁶ The book is also a model of Elias's conception of the discipline of sociology: not as a narrow, present-orientated, problem-solving empirical research technique but as an omnibus discipline overarching sociology, anthropology, political science, history, International Relations, and even certain (unfashionable) aspects of economics – always sociogenetic and psychogenetic, macro and micro. Central to holding all this together are processes of conscience formation. The formation of habitus is a principal bridge between the social processes of the development of manners in the (original) first volume of *On the Process of Civilisation* and the state-formation processes that are central in the second. Also of great interest in this regard is the last book published in Elias's (2013a) lifetime, *Studies on the Germans*,¹⁷ the subtitle of which is “Power struggles and the development of habitus in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.” The point to stress is that Elias was very far from being a one-book wonder.

Sociology, as a university discipline, has become highly fragmented, with numerous specialised subdisciplines knowing little about each other. And Elias disliked even more the fragmentation that has also been very marked among the social sciences and the humanities: history, psychology, sociology all belonged together from his perspective. One curious consequence

of this is that people working in the interstices of the social sciences – for example, criminologists or International Relations scholars – often seem to grasp Elias’s ideas more readily than do mainstream sociologists. It reminds me of when I was promoted to the rank of Reader at the University of Exeter many years ago, after the publication of my book *All Manners of Food* (Mennell, 1985), it was indiscreetly leaked to me that one of the half-dozen or so professors who had been consulted (a leading figure in British sociology at the time) said that the book was very interesting, “but is it sociology?” That’s what we are up against!

Phew! That was a long answer to your first questions. I’ll try to be more succinct now!

TSL The publication of the 18 volumes of the Collected Works of Norbert Elias was an important enterprise that you undertook. What do you think is the impact of this publication for the understanding of Elias’s theory? It has been widely discussed that the first publication of *The Civilizing Process* in two separate volumes has blurred the understanding of the thesis Elias was proposing there. After working on all of Elias’s texts, which includes not only his books but also journal articles and interviews, some of them dug out of the Elias archives in Marbach,¹⁸ what new possibilities does this open to the understanding and interpretation of his work?

SJM Before I joined it, the Board of the Elias Foundation had decided to prioritise the publication of Elias’s *Gesammelte Schriften* in German. One reason was that almost all of his books had been published by Suhrkamp, although many were out of print. Suhrkamp agreed to bring out new scholarly editions of his all his works. I was given a watching brief over the possibility of the German series being followed by a corresponding Collected Works in English. Or rather, it seemed, the impossibility. Things were more complicated in English because Elias had had convoluted relations with British publishers, and his books had been published under half a dozen different imprints, which raised enormous copyright problems. Apart from *The Civilizing Process*, most of the books in English were out of print too, even though the rights had not reverted to the Foundation. Finally, our literary agents, Liepman AG in Zürich, pointed out that there was a loophole in international copyright law, which allowed a Collected Works series to be published in spite of earlier editions being still under copyright with other publishers.

Meanwhile, in the mid-1990s, my wife Barbara and I had founded a small university press – UCD Press – on behalf of University College Dublin, with Barbara as Executive Editor, and me as chairman of the Editorial Committee. About two-thirds of our books have been on Irish subjects, but not all. Hermann and Joop persuaded us to publish the Collected Works, really the most ambitious project we had undertaken.

The editors of the *Gesammelte Schriften* had done important ground-work for us. Our 18 volumes broadly follow their 19; the extra volume in German (vol. 18) contains Elias's poems and aphorisms, and we decided it was too daunting a task to translate the German poems.¹⁹ Our editorial policy was not exactly the same as the Germans', however. We decided to include several essays that had been published posthumously, authorised by the Foundation, while the Germans included only items that had been approved by Elias himself. In both languages, the three volumes (14, 15, and 16 in both cases) containing the essays are among the most important because his essays originally appeared (sometimes quite obscurely) in many different journals and over many years and in two languages, making many of them quite difficult to obtain. Collecting them altogether in one place is important in itself as a contribution to the wider appreciation of Elias's thinking. Mind you, we didn't follow exactly the same policy as the Germans did. They decided to arrange the essays chronologically, whereas we organised them thematically: *Essays I: On the Sociology of Knowledge and the Sciences*; *Essays II: On Civilising Processes, State Formation and National Identity*; and *Essays III: On Sociology and the Humanities*. I think our policy was better! There are also a few essays in other volumes: those written by the young Elias before the war in *Early Writings* (vol. I); those on Watteau and German Baroque poetry in volume 12, along with the short book on Mozart; and the unfinished but very significant texts on Freud and on Lévy-Bruhl as "supplements" in volume 18, which also contains the consolidated index to all the 18 volumes.

As General Editor, I did the final editing of all the volumes, but many other friends played their parts. Richard Kilminster was chair of the Editorial Advisory Board and was involved in editing no fewer than seven of the volumes. He and I are particularly proud of the three volumes of essays, a large collaborative task. Others involved in editing particular volumes were Eric Baker, Artur Bogner, Johan Goudsblom, Edmund Jephcott, Marc Joly, Robert van Krieken, Katie Liston, Steven Loyal, Stephen Quilley, Alan and Brigitte Scott, and Cas Wouters. Edmund Jephcott, the original translator of *The Civilizing Process*, undertook to translate all of Elias's writings that had not previously appeared in English. And the eminent British historian Sir Keith Thomas accepted the vague title of Patron of the Collected Works, which meant in practice that he read the proofs of every volume and gave valuable advice to me, as well as averting some egregious historical mistakes.

You ask, though, how important it is that we now have the Collected Works in English. I think it is important, of course, and gradually they will help to make Elias better understood. A key feature is the cumulative index to all 18 volumes (in volume 18), which empowers readers to interrogate Elias in a new way. Remember, however, that UCD Press remains a minnow among publishers – we do not have a big international marketing apparatus. And it frustrates me that several earlier editions of Elias's books, most especially

The Civilizing Process, are still in print and still widely cited in spite of the text of the new edition, *On the Process of Civilisation*, being very much superior. (It was, in retrospect, a mistake to change the title of that most important volume – it has led to further confusion).

It should be noted that, in spite of all our labours, the Collected Works cannot be said to be *complete*. There are enormous numbers of unpublished papers in the DLA at Marbach, many of them in the rather chaotic state in which Elias left them. Some, however, have been edited and published under the authority of the Norbert Elias Foundation. Among the notable recent ones are: Jan Haut, Paddy Dolan, Dieter Reicher, and Raúl Sánchez García (eds.), *Excitement Processes: Norbert Elias's Unpublished Works on Sports, Leisure, Body, Culture* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2018), which includes Elias's notable essay "Spontaneity and self-consciousness," p. 23–76; Dieter Reicher, Adrian Jitschin, Behrouz Alikhani, and Arjan Post (eds.), *African Civilising Processes* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, forthcoming 2022) which, drawn from Elias's reflections on his experiences in Ghana in 1962–4, ought to dispel any idea that he was "Eurocentric," let alone "colonialist" in his outlook; and Christoph Egen (ed.), *Sozialer Kanon, soziale Existenz und das Problem der Sinngebung: Ein soziologischer Essay* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, forthcoming 2022).

TSL Talking about theory, can you point to us what are Elias's major influences? Do you see any changes in this regard throughout his long and fruitful working life?

SJM Oh dear! Elias was always irritated, infuriated even, when people asked which previous sociologists had influenced him most. He thought they were trying to reduce him to a formula – 20% Marx, 25% Weber, 15% Simmel, 30% Mannheim, or whatever – like something to be found in a recipe book. He thought it showed that they could not appreciate his own originality, his enormous power of *synthesis* – and he was right! On the other hand, when he was little known, I remember that, in Britain at least, potentially sympathetic people still felt they needed to know "where he had come from." Indeed, Richard Kilminster has recalled how fellow graduate students in Leicester in the early 1970s joked (in the light of popular science fiction of the time) that Elias must be a spaceman or, at least, have had his brain rewired by aliens. It was as plausible an explanation as any for his apparent arrival fully formed with his own distinctive and powerful synthesis.²⁰

In fact, Elias was often accused of inadequately referencing his sources. That is partly a reflection of one aspect of changing standards of behaviour that Elias did not study: standards governing academic citations, which have become much more demanding – some would say more pedantic – even during my academic career. One example is Elias's use of the concept of *zweifronten Schicht*, two-front stratum, which is straight out of Georg Simmel. Elias once

said to me that in Germany before the war it would have been considered pedantic if he had footnoted Simmel when he used the term; it was just assumed that “everyone,” meaning the then much smaller circle of sociologists, knew that it was Simmel’s concept.

What one can say is that Elias always stressed how much he had benefited intellectually from his early medical training – at the University of Breslau he had studied medicine, alongside philosophy, as far as the equivalent of what in Britain would be called “the first MB,” the pre-clinical stage.²¹ He had learned a lot from his time dissecting cadavers, especially cutting up brains, which helped to make him so sceptical of conventional philosophical ideas like the mind/body dualism. Later, at Heidelberg, his first *Habilitation* sponsor, Alfred Weber, seems not to have influenced him very much but he became friends with Karl Mannheim, who certainly did. Obviously, Mannheim’s pioneering work in the sociology of knowledge is an ingredient in Elias’s thinking but Mannheim was mainly concerned with ideologies and Elias’s sociology expands to take in the whole of human knowledge, including everything from animism to the modern sciences. Freud’s impact came after Elias moved to Frankfurt as Mannheim’s *Assistent* in 1929. There, among many others, Elias met S. H. Fuchs [later Foulkes], with whom, in London after the war, he collaborated in laying the theoretical foundations of Group Analytic therapy.

Earlier in his life, Elias read voraciously. He kept abreast of current developments in the natural sciences as well as absorbing great tracts of history – which he regarded as essential raw material for any effective sociology. I have the impression that later, perhaps, he read less, partly because, by the time I came to know him, his eyesight was failing. Richard Kilminster points out, for example, that Elias ignored certain schools of philosophy, such as the British analytic school and American pragmatism. Yet, I always found that he seemed to be aware of recent writings; he seemed to absorb them by osmosis or perhaps his younger colleagues told him about them. I was astonished, for example, when we unearthed a floppy disc from Marbach with the finished version of the Introduction to *The Symbol Theory* (Elias, 2011: 12-15) — one of the last things he wrote —, it contained a caustic little discussion of Jacques Derrida.

TSL Elias wrote a significant number of books and essays. The Civilizing Process can be regarded as his magnum opus. The theory of civilising processes can also be seen as a central theory (Quilley & Loyal, 2005) around which he develops related discussions, such as his theory of knowledge and established and outsiders relations. Your book *Norbert Elias: An Introduction* (Mennell, 1989)²² goes in the direction of mapping all of this. Can I give you the challenge to answer, in a few paragraphs, how we can integrate all these discussions in one big framework, how are all these concepts and discussions related to one another?

SJM I don't want to repeat everything that I said in my long answer to your first question. The one thing I should perhaps add, because I teasingly played down *On the Process of Civilisation*, is the connection between the theory of civilising processes and the developmental sociology of knowledge and the sciences. As I remarked, the reduction in the level of everyday danger and unpredictability is a condition for a rising level of emotional detachment that is necessary for the growth of science and its emancipation from superstitions. And that greater security is made possible by state-formation processes, elimination contests, and the monopolisation of the legitimate means of violence, along with the linked processes of the growth of trade, urbanisation, bureaucratisation, and the spreading web of interdependence, just as they gradually change manners and habitus.

The word "civilisation" has always been problematic, leading to infinite misunderstandings among politically correct sociologists, and especially among anthropologists. Unfortunately, as he later said, he could not think of a different, less ideologically loaded word that captured all these connotations.²³ So he ended up using the word "civilisation" in two distinct ways, without perhaps always making the distinction entirely clear. In the technical jargon that became current among social scientists in later decades, the "native" sense is what anthropologists like to call an *emic* concept, or phenomenologists like Alfred Schutz called a "first-order" concept. The technical sense that Elias wanted to develop, of civilisation as a technical term for a long-term process, is an *etic* or "second-order" concept. I have recently come to think that the familiar social scientific term *deferred gratification* expresses the central idea of Elias's theory. It does not capture *all* the nuances of the word "civilisation," but if he had used it more it might have neutralised some of the more visceral objections to "civilisation" (Mennell, 2018b).

As for my book, I have explained that I wrote it – in the face of Elias's objections – precisely because I saw a need for "mapping all this," as you put it. Elias said to me, around 1987, "Stephen, while I am alive, I am the best person to explain my ideas." I quietly disagreed: Elias – even though he had this brilliant talent for synthesis and was certainly himself aware of how everything fitted together – was not, in my view, at his best at pulling it all together in a big picture explanation for newcomers to his ideas, and what it called for was a certain didactic skill. Of course, he was right in one respect: he was still adding to his publications, with Michael Schröter acting as midwife for many of them. As a result, my book does not have much to say about late books like *The Society of Individuals*, *Studies on the Germans* (which Eric Dunning and I were to translate in the 1990s), and *The Symbol Theory* (Elias, 2011), nor about *Humana Conditio* (Elias, 2010), which ventures into international relations. But my book did the job. It was the first book about Elias in English, and it is still in print more than 30 years later. Just slightly earlier, Hermann Korte (1988) had published the first edition of his highly successful

book in German, which is somewhat more biographically organised. And there have been other books since, such as Robert van Krieken's (1998).

For myself, I trod very carefully because Elias was still alive when my book appeared. I not only took great care to be accurate in my summaries of his ideas but, in the biographical chapter, I stuck very closely to what Elias (2013b) said himself in his autobiographical essay and interview (which at the time were available only in German and Dutch respectively). He was rather secretive about some things. For some mysterious reason, he always played down his early phase as an active Zionist. And then there was the fact that he was gay, which even most of us who were close to him did not recognise. He was never "out" in Britain – unsurprisingly given that homosexual acts were illegal there for most of his life. But he also seemed to have had many close female friends; perhaps he was bisexual.

TSL Processes of civilisation versus processes of decivilisation is one of the important debates among Eliasians and one in which you have an important participation. At this point, what are your conclusions in this regard?

SJM Decivilising processes were always part of the theory of civilising processes. I am fond of quoting what Elias (2012b: 576) said in his 1939 *magnum opus*: "The armour of civilised conduct would crumble very rapidly if, through a change in society, the degree of insecurity that existed earlier were to break in upon us again, and if danger became as incalculable as it once was. Corresponding fears would soon burst the limits set to them today." The concept of decivilising processes came to greater prominence, though, in the late 1980s, when I was writing my book and when I wrote an article specifically on this idea (Mennell, 1990). How civilising and decivilising processes relate to and co-exist with each other is a complicated issue, but essentially an empirical one.

For a time in the 1970s, there was a debate among Dutch sociologists about whether the apparent "relaxation" of manners and mores in the twentieth century, and especially in the turmoil of the 1960s, represented a reversal of the long-term trend identified by Elias. However, it is now generally accepted that Cas Wouters, in a remarkable international programme of research extending over half a century, has demonstrated that "informalisation" does not represent a reversal at all. Rather, the more informal and apparently casual standards of our time actually necessitate not less but greater "mutually expected self-restraint" than the older, more rigid rules (Wouters, 2004, 2007).

I should also mention Abram de Swaan's (2001) concept of "dyscivilisation." He used it to recognise, as Zygmunt Bauman (1989) also recognised, that the highly organised genocides of the twentieth century involved a perverse form of civilisation – in the *etic* or technical sense, of course, and not at all in the *emic* or popular sense of the term.

What is more controversial is Elias's notion of "functional democratisation" and the opposite idea of "functional de-democratisation," which I rather casually introduced in my book *The American Civilizing Process* (Mennell, 2007). Elias used "functional" in a rather peculiar way: it pertains to the functions that people fulfil for each other, and, therefore, to the power ratios between them, and it has nothing to do with the old-time functionalism of the 1940s to 1960s (Elias, 2012c: 72-73, 121-123, 147). "Functional democratisation" means a situation where power ratios in a society at large are tending to become relatively more equal, even though, at least in the short term, political democracy may lag behind. I use "functional de-democratisation" to refer to the many trends towards greater inequality that we now observe in the United States, Britain, and many other countries. The complication is that, obviously, democratising and de-democratising trends can be happening at the same time in different areas of social life. For some reason that I don't quite understand, my old friend Cas Wouters does not like the idea of functional de-democratisation (Wouters, 2019). I think he surprisingly misconstrues the word "functional," and, more importantly, sees the idea of de-democratisation as in some way contradicting the great trend of informalisation, which it was never intended to. Social reality is just complicated and contrary trends co-exist.

TSL What can you say about Elias and Bourdieu? How do you see the connection between their theoretical approaches?

SJM Yes, I remember Joop Goudsblom remarking that it was not a question of either of them influencing the other but a case of congruence or confluence – they flowed together, like two rivers. Both had their sources up in the hills of philosophy, though Elias distanced himself further from this origin than did Bourdieu. Anthropology was a more important staging post for Bourdieu than Elias, who, indeed in his time in West Africa, rather picked fights with the anthropologists; they returned his hostility. But both ended up as empirical-theoretical sociologists and found they had much in common. They came to regard each other as friends. Bourdieu invited Elias to lecture at the Collège de France and was one of the main speakers at the great celebration in Amsterdam of Elias's ninetieth birthday in 1987.

They used some of the same concepts. I remember that sometime in the early 2000s, the Elias and Bourdieu online discussion lists became entangled with each other and some of the Bourdieusians were almost outraged when it was pointed out to them that the concept of habitus had not been invented by Bourdieu but had been used much earlier by Elias and many others.²⁴ Their common use of this key concept, however, also highlights a subtle difference between them. Bourdieu was fond of very highfalutin' cumbersome definitions. He defined habitus as:

systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively “regulated” and “regular” without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them and, being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor (Bourdieu, 1972: 72).

In contrast, Elias defined it by an everyday term consisting of two words: “second nature.”

This difference in ways of expressing what are often similar, compatible ideas points to something that makes me feel a little uneasy with Bourdieu’s work. I have a feeling that he never quite emancipated himself from the influence of French structuralism and he seems to have wanted to create a whole apparatus of impressive-sounding but static concepts; he was not so thoroughly a *processual* thinker as Elias. This means that Bourdieu’s work has a much more instant appeal to mainstream sociologists, who tend to like a set of conceptual bits and pieces, like Meccano or Lego, that they can bolt together in the hope of explaining whatever it is that they are studying. (That was also part of the appeal of Talcott Parsons, back in the day). Underlying this difference is a whole attitude to the character of social reality. Bourdieu said that he had to write in a very complicated way because social reality was so complicated. Elias, in contrast, said that social reality only appeared so complicated because of the inappropriate, static concepts that were used; once one thought about it in a more thoroughly processual way, social reality appeared relatively simple and could be described in a simpler vocabulary. (It has to be admitted, however, that some of Elias’s processual neologisms, such as “courtisation” or “sportisation,” are not pretty).

TSL One of your significant achievements is the book *The American Civilizing Process* (2007). Can you highlight to us what are your major findings there?

SJM From the 1960s onwards, I had something of a love–hate relationship with America – I was involved in a minor way in the early stages of the Vietnam protest movement when I was at Harvard in 1966–67. The “love” component has become weaker over the years, although I always enjoyed going there, and – like most academics – I have lots of wonderful American friends. The book was a long time in gestation. I was always conscious of the charge of Eurocentrism being levelled at Elias and I argued that, just because one *studies* Europe, does not necessarily make one’s study Eurocentric. Elias always said that he had discovered long-term processes in European history which could also be found to be operating in other parts of the world. He used to say that China had experienced the longest-term civilising process of all.²⁵

When I moved to Australia in 1990, I intended to develop this insight in a location geographically closer to the Far East. But I did not stay long at Monash, and the work did not get very far.²⁶ When I was moving to Ireland in 1993, Chris Rojek persuaded me that it was more important to explain Elias's theory to American sociologists. And, in fact, *The American Civilizing Process* is structured broadly in the same way as *On the Process of Civilisation*. That is to say, it begins with a discussion of the idea of "American civilisation," then moves on to the development of American "manners" and their relation to social hierarchy, and the first part ends (as does Elias's) with a discussion of violence. The next part of the book deals with the formation of the United States as a political unit, from Independence through the "Wild West" to the American Empire and what I call the curse of the "American Dream." The final chapter, on "America and humanity as a whole" not only tries to pull together the findings, rather as Elias does in the fourth part of *On the Process of Civilisation*, the "Overview" or "Synopsis"; more importantly, perhaps, it also looks at the (dubious) role of the USA in the world today, taking up Elias's later preoccupation with wars and international relations. The one feature in my book that had no real counterpart in Elias's is the penultimate chapter, on "Involvement, detachment, and American Religiosity" but that obviously is also inspired by Elias's later writings on knowledge and the sciences.

Findings? Well, many people – especially Americans – wanted to read my book in the light of old claims of "American exceptionalism." Did I see the USA as exceptional or not? That is precisely the wrong way to look at it, and a classic instance of a misleading "static dichotomy." I showed that many of the same processes that Elias had seen in Europe could also be observed at work in the history of the USA. To begin with, it was clear that, until sometime in the nineteenth century, the American upper classes had looked to European upper-class people for their models of good manners, but that, as the balance of power internationally tilted towards America being the world super-power in the twentieth century, the flow of influence reversed: America now sets the models to a large degree. I went on to show how so many of the processes at work in Europe could also be seen in America: for example, state formation, elimination contests, and a great variety of integration contests (in the broad sense, not just in ethnic relations). It was even evident that *trends* in violence are not very different on the two sides of the Atlantic, even though the *rate* of homicide is far higher in the States.

And yet the similarities should not be exaggerated. Even though many of the same part-processes have been at work, the way they play out may produce a distinctly different outcome. In a book published at the same time as mine and with a similar title, my friend, the Hispanist and international relations scholar Charles Jones, has argued that the USA is a lot more like Latin America and a lot less like Western Europe than we Europeans are accustomed to think (Jones, 2007). To simplify a complex argument, Jones

suggests that the USA and its hemispheric neighbours to the south share a number of historical experiences that give their societies certain common features and set them to some extent apart from Western Europe. These include the legacy of conquest and of slavery (both of which have contributed to race and racism as salient traits), marked religiosity, and relatively high rates of violence. We may add a rapacious attitude to natural resources, born of the abundance that confronted settlers.

I did not use the term in the book, but by now I think I am not alone in considering the United States a “failed state.” We all know so many sensible, “civilised” Americans that it is hard to credit how close the politically and culturally divided USA has come to being simply ungovernable. It is not just the nonsense of the right to bear arms and the ludicrous interpretation of the Second Amendment by the highly politicised Supreme Court, although the failure of the government to achieve an effective monopoly of the legitimate means of violence is certainly very significant. One should never overlook the principle of “path dependency” – the same processes intertwined in a different sequence produce very different outcomes. Pieter Spierenburg, I think, offered the best explanation of the problem of violence in the USA. He argued that “democracy came too early” (Spierenburg, 2006). In most parts of Western Europe, there took place over many centuries gradual but often bloody processes of centralisation, eventuating in the concentration of the means of violence in fewer and fewer hands, and ultimately in the establishment of a relatively effective monopoly apparatus in the hands of kings. The process was in its final stages when European colonisation of North America began. Once stable and effective royal monopolies of violence had been established, as they were, in general by the late seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, the people’s aim in subsequent struggles – most spectacularly in the French Revolution – was not to challenge or destroy the monopoly as such, but rather to ‘co-possess’ the monopoly. In other words, the aim was to assert a more broadly based control over those who exercised the monopoly, to democratise it. In North America, however, “there was no phase of centralisation before democratisation set in,” and “democracy came to America too early.” By that he means something quite factual:

the inhabitants had lacked the time to become accustomed to being disarmed. As a consequence, the idea remained alive that the very existence of a monopoly of force was undesirable. And it remained alive in an increasingly democratic form: not [as in medieval Europe] of regional elites carving out their private principality, but of common people claiming the right of self-defence. [...] Local elites and, increasingly, common people equated democracy with the right of armed protection of their own property and interests (Spierenburg, 2006: 109-110).

The problem is compounded by what we may call American Cartesianism. “America,” said Alexis de Tocqueville in 1840, “is [...] the one country in the world where the precepts of Descartes are least studied and most

followed.” In their common assumptions Americans sought “to escape [...] from the yoke of habits, from family maxims, from class opinions, and, up to a certain point, from national prejudices; to take tradition only as information, and [...] to seek the reason for things in themselves and in themselves alone” (Tocqueville, 2000²⁷: 403). In other words, the mode of self-experience that Elias called *homo clausus*, an extreme form of individualism, is unhealthily prevalent in the USA.²⁸

A good illustration of this is the extraordinary, politicised resistance of some Americans during the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020–22 to government curtailments of “individual freedom,” and even the wearing of face masks. One British commentator has put it pithily:

A lot of the resistance to masking up in the United States seems to stem from a general cultural resistance (especially on the American right) to the whole notion of a collective good, and indeed against the very idea of doing something for the benefit of other people.

Start caring about the welfare of strangers and the next thing you know [...] communism. It's the very fact that wearing a mask is meant not to protect the wearer, but other people *from* the wearer, that seems to put some off (Withers, 2020).

Of course, one should not over-generalise. In her great study of ordinary people in Louisiana who were supporters of the Tea Party and held what by European standards are extreme right-wing views, Arlie Russell Hochschild (2016) emphasises that these people were not ogres: in their own communities they were kind and caring – but they had little understanding of, and much hostility towards, wider levels of politics and society.

The great problem of all this is the extraordinary way in which American cultural attitudes spread like a virus across the world. A French intellectual described the opening of Disneyland in Paris as a “cultural Chernobyl.” Were it confined to Disney, that would not be too bad, but I see America as one great cultural Chernobyl.

TSL Having written *The American Civilizing Process*, what do you have to say to us about Donald Trump? I am not just interested on your thoughts about Trump himself, but mainly I am trying to understand in which ways Elias can help us understand our current world, if you can say something in this regard...

SJM As I said, I planned the book with the intention of applying Elias's ideas to American history, with the aim of helping American sociologists to appreciate them. But most of the book was actually written during the Presidency of George W. Bush, and the later chapters especially took on a more political, increasingly hostile, tone – though only, I think, after performing Elias's famous “detour via detachment.”

Although Elias himself avoided “political” controversy, in my view, figurational or process sociology is not devoid of political implications. With

its strong emphasis on the ubiquity of chains of social interdependence and the consequential ubiquity of power ratios in the relations between people and groups of people, it tends to be associated with the left-of-centre socialist or (more usually) moderate Social Democratic or Social Liberal traditions, with their concern for collective welfare and greater equality – not to mention their tendency usually to feel sympathy for less powerful outsiders. But it is difficult to see any affinity at all between it and the extreme radical neo-liberalism which, for the present, represents the spirit of the age across the Western world. Emanating especially from the USA is a fervent belief in “the freedom of the individual,” whatever that means. But individuals are not the separate “atoms” of society: the “freedom of the individual” is a philosophical myth because, as Elias (2012c: 162) succinctly pointed out, “there are always simultaneously many mutually dependent individuals, whose interdependence to a greater or lesser extent limits each one’s scope for action.” The exercise of choice by one person or group may constrain or foreclose the choices available to others.

I don’t think I was ever politically naïve. I was involved in British politics from my teenage years and stood for Parliament as a Social Democrat candidate in the 1983 General Election. But if I had ever had any illusions about American politics, they were shattered by the Supreme Court’s judicial *coup d’état*, in 2000, that gave the Presidency to Bush, even though Al Gore is widely believed to have won. It all hinged, if you remember, on the mess in Florida, and the Republicans managed to halt the recount that had begun, incompetently, there. Shortly afterwards, my old friend Randall Collins – one of the world’s finest sociologists – was visiting Dublin, and in the car from the airport I was angrily proclaiming that “I’ve been involved in recounts! – when you have a recount, it means you recount the votes, *all* the votes.” Randall said that wasn’t practicable in America, and then he began to explain the Electoral College to me. Of course I knew all about the Electoral College, and one of the problems is that we, non-Americans, know far more about America than Americans – most Americans, obviously not people like Randall – know about the rest of the world. I have compared it to the one-way mirror there used to be installed in social psychological laboratories: we can see them, but they can’t see us (Mennell, 2011).

One thing that is now obvious to the rest of the world is that the sacred US Constitution is long past its sell-by date, moribund, with the stench of decay upon it. They need an entirely new constitution but it is completely inconceivable that they will ever get one. Under the outdated eighteenth-century constitution, too much is delegated to corrupt states. The gerrymandering of electoral district boundaries indeed takes its name from one of the signatories of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. “Voter suppression” – preventing poorer voters, especially African Americans, from exercising their vote is rife. American elections have always been corrupt

(Gumbel, 2016).²⁹ And it is also significant that America is one of the few states – along with Britain – to retain the undemocratic “first past the post” voting system rather than one or other form of proportional representation. In both the USA and Britain, this serves to polarise political debate and undermine possibilities of compromise (which used to be proclaimed as a British virtue – it no longer is).

Well, to continue, I was shaken rigid by the American invasion of Iraq, in cahoots with Tony Blair’s Labour government in Britain. It has destabilised the Middle East, with untold knock-on consequences across the world. But why should we have been surprised? In his farewell address to the nation on leaving office in 1960, President Eisenhower (1911: 1035-1040) warned of the danger of the “military-industrial complex.”³⁰ It has all come to pass. George W. Bush explicitly claimed the right for America to intervene in any country anywhere and the US has garrisoned the planet, with military bases in something like two-thirds of UN member states. The USA is a full-blown militaristic state, with an economy dependent on perpetual war; the “high-tech” industry is embroiled in this too. There is also a cultural component to all this. Gore Vidal (2004) alleged that there was always “a horrendous foreign enemy at hand to blow us up in the night out of hatred of our Goodness and rosy plumpness.”

Barack Obama came between Bush and Trump, and of course he was a much more intelligent and fundamentally decent person – but even he presided over weekly meetings to decide who should be assassinated next. As we talked, we did not know whether Trump or Biden would be elected in November 2020, that Trump would dispute his decisive loss to Biden, let alone that he would incite an insurrectionary mob to storm the Capitol to prevent Biden’s confirmation on 6 January 2021. But I do not think it is easy to imagine the USA reverting to the kind of decent “force for good” in the world that far too many people still imagine it to be. It is, let’s face it, a force for bad.

How much more hostile would the book be if I wrote it now! Trump himself is quite poisonous and has legitimated poisonous behaviour by governments in other parts of the world, notably your own obnoxious Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. I begin to wonder whether I have been too hard on Talcott Parsons for his emphasis on “shared values” (which has become a cliché now routinely used rhetorically by politicians). Trump has broken most of the rules of common everyday decent behaviour, let alone more fundamental standards or “values.”³¹

Elias would not have approved of me sounding off politically like this but I still think his ideas can be very useful in understanding the situation in which we find ourselves. For one thing, he was certainly no stranger to cultural conflicts, the “culture wars” that seem to be replacing old-style battles over economic issues, and which seem to have played an important part in landing us with the appalling Trump in America (as well as other

disasters elsewhere). Of course, one should not seek to use Elias to explain everything: a theory that explains everything explains nothing. So, in recent years I have been casting my mind back to the old (mainly American) sociological literature on what in the 1950s and 1960s used to be called “the social foundations of democracy” (Mennell, 2017). It seems to have been forgotten, but it should not be. Among other things, it points to stable, socially rooted, public opinion as a necessity for stable democratic politics. Social media have served to destabilise public opinion and to spread the fantasy that is so well exploited by populist demagogues like Trump. So has the increasing partisanship of the traditional media in America, where all regulation has been abandoned. And so has the awful *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* decision in 2010 by the Supreme Court (again!), which prohibited any limits on political campaign funding by rich individuals and corporations, giving free rein to their manipulation of the electorate.

I discuss the relevance of Elias for understanding present-day politics in a recent paper (Mennell, 2021). It explores the implication of Elias’s game models for how the increasing complexity of interdependencies bears on his stated aim of “improving the human means of orientation.” Has global society become too complicated for most people to be able to understand it? It asks, among other things, how this is linked to the conditions necessary for representative democracy. The paper concludes by asking how much influence sociology has had on how people at large think about society and understand how it works. In the main, they continue to think in psychologistic rather than sociological terms, notably by using what Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh has called “the attribution of blame” as a means of orientation.³² What does a general deficiency in “joined-up” thinking imply about the prospects of (relatively) democratic government in today’s highly joined-up world?

As a final point, I should mention that in his last decade Elias did become increasingly concerned with one major political issue: the risk of war and international relations. More recently Andrew Linklater has followed Van den Bergh in applying ideas from Elias to international relations.³³ And many members of the process sociology research network internationally are very much concerned with the environmental crisis (denied by Trump).

TSL Thank you very much, Stephen, it has been a great pleasure!

Received on 19-nov-2021 | Approved on 28-mar-2022

Tatiana Savoia Landini holds a degree in social sciences from USP, where she received a master's and a doctorate in sociology. She is an associate professor at the Department of Social Sciences and the Graduate Program in Social Sciences at EFLCH-Unifesp and editor of the Palgrave Studies on Norbert Elias collection (Palgrave-Macmillan). She published, with François Depelteau, *Norbert Elias and social theory*, *Norbert Elias and empirical research*, and *Norbert Elias and violence*. She also works on sexual violence against children and adolescents.

NOTAS

- * For their help and comments on earlier drafts of this interview, Stephen Mennell should like to thank Gordon Fyfe, Richard Kilminster, Hermann Korte, Andrew Linklater, and Barbara Mennell.
- 1 I thank Prof. Mennell not only for a generous interview but for also having welcomed me to University College Dublin in 2003 for a sandwich internship period during my PhD and having inserted me into the figurationists' network.
- 2 Its first edition, published in 1989, was titled *Norbert Elias: Civilization and the Human Self-Image*.
- 3 Michel Foucault unfortunately passed away about 10 days after the conference.
- 4 Elias himself tells this part of his biography in "Reflections on a life" (Elias, 1994: 101), from which I emphasize the following excerpt: "In the course of my work on my doctoral dissertation I had gradually – in painful arguments with myself – arrived at the conviction that the whole idea of a priori truth did not hold water. I could no longer ignore the fact that all that Kant regarded as timeless and as given prior to all experience, whether it be the idea of causal connections or of time or of natural and moral laws, together with the words that went with them, had to be learned from other people in order to be present in the consciousness of the individual human being. As acquired knowledge they therefore formed part of a person's store of experiences. And as this now seemed to me irrefutable, I wrote as much in my dissertation."
- 5 Published as the first chapter in the homonymous book.
- 6 Elias himself, at one point in his life, turned against the label of Figurationist Sociology. See: Engler (2013).
- 7 We must acknowledge, however, the work done from this theoretical orientation, most of which are linked to master and PhD courses in Education and Physical Education.
- 8 In his theory of knowledge and the sciences, Elias always had this favourite image of what he called the "torch race," or what we would in English more normally call a relay race, where the baton is passed on from one runner to the next, and by analogy the torch of knowledge from one generation to the other. (The analogy goes back to Plato's *Republic*; see Elias, 2006c). One of the younger "fi-

gurational” sociologists – I can’t remember who – once said “It is all very well, but I wish Norbert would show a little bit less reluctance to let go of the torch himself.” In similar humorous vein, Hermann Korte once wrote that “There is by now no area of sociology where the theory of civilisation is not being used to try to formulate and answer research problems. The theory has become, in the 1990s more than ever before, a fixed part of the repertory of German sociology. This has partly to do with the fact that, following Elias’s’ death, this theory can be made part of the canon without the danger of finding oneself publicly corrected by its author” – see Korte (1994).

- 9 Elias himself came to prefer the term “process sociology” rather than “figurational sociology” to describe his approach. It is not quite clear how “figurational sociology” first came into use and it is not very helpful because it gives far too much prominence to the concept of “figuration,” which Elias introduced only as a sort of shorthand and it is not in itself of great importance. I rarely use it myself.
- 10 Elias was, unfashionably, a great admirer of Comte; see Elias (2012a).
- 11 See also Kilminster (1998) and Heilbron (1995). The title given to the English translation of Heilbron’s book makes nonsense of the thesis, which is about the emancipation of sociology from philosophy in nineteenth-century France; the publishers, Polity Press, insisted on the term “social theory,” which has been especially promoted by Anthony Giddens, who founded Polity.
- 12 See my account of this amusing episode in Mennell (2006), an article dealing more widely with my personal relations with Elias between the early 1970s and his death in 1990.
- 13 Another philosophical culprit, as Gordon Fyfe points out, was Peter Winch (1958), although his intellectual source lays in Wittgenstein and British analytic philosophy, which Elias largely ignored. Wittgenstein did, however, have considerable influence in sociology, especially on ethnomethodologists. See my early article (Mennell, 1975: 287-302), written when Popper influenced me more than Elias.
- 14 For a characteristic orthodox philosophical view, see Dunne (2014), together with Richard Kilminster’s (2014c) trenchant reply.

- 15 Earlier English editions were published under the title *The Civilizing Process* but the publishing history of what was originally two volumes was complicated, and the Collected Works edition is a far superior, much corrected, and amplified scholarly text.
- 16 Contrary to widespread perception, Elias emphatically denied that he was an “historical sociologist”; he was a sociologist who very often used historical evidence – the point, however, is that *time*, whether long or short, was always a component in his writing. He disapproved of the fragmentation of sociology that (especially since about the 1960s) has produced “historical sociology” as a specialised sub-discipline; still less did he approve of the notion that “theory” was a special branch of the discipline with its own breed of specialist eggheads.
- 17 Earlier English editions were published under the title *The Germans*.
- 18 That is, the Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach am Neckar (DLA for short), which acquired all of Elias’s papers from the Foundation after his death.
- 19 Elias wrote three or four poems in English and one in French, which can be found in an appendix to *Interviews and Autobiographical Reflections* (Elias, 2013b: 297-300).
- 20 Richard Kilminster, “Why do you ask that question?” unpublished paper (1996); planned publication in Kilminster, *The Dawn of Detachment* (London: Routledge, forthcoming).
- 21 Gordon Fyfe recalls that Elias’s undergraduate social psychology course in sociology in Leicester bore the imprint of this: it included the functioning of the brain and the nervous system. *Scientific American* papers were included in student reading lists.
- 22 Paperback edition, under title *Norbert Elias: An Introduction*, 1992; reprinted, Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1998.
- 23 “I could have looked around for less ideologically charged terms for long-term changes of behaviour standards, or tried to free the concept of civilisation from its ideological burdens and transform it into an ideologically neutral term with the aid of appropriate documentation. I did cast about for other possible expressions but did not find any that were more appropriate. Finally, I decided to develop the concept of civilisation into an ideologically neutral,

- fact-based term in conjunction with abundant empirical documentation” (Elias, 2008).
- 24 The excellent article on Bourdieu in Wikipedia (Pierre..., 2022) sums up its history succinctly: “The concept of habitus was inspired by Marcel Mauss” notion of body technique and *hexis*, as well as Erwin Panofsky’s concept of *intuitus*. The word habitus itself can be found in the works of Mauss, as well as of Norbert Elias, Max Weber, Edmund Husserl, and Alfred Schutz as re-workings of the concept as it emerged in Aristotle’s notion of *hexis*, which would become habitus through Thomas Aquinas’s Latin translation.”
- 25 See for example *On the Process of Civilisation* (Elias, 2012b: p. 453).
- 26 See Mennell (1996: 117-134).
- 27 Originally 1835-40.
- 28 Incidentally, I think this American Cartesianism presents an epistemological barrier to many Americans – even American sociologists – fully understanding Elias.
- 29 Partisan conflicts over electoral boundaries, and especially Republican efforts at voter disqualification, have accelerated since Trump disputed the 2020 election.
- 30 In an early draft, he had intended to speak of the “military–industrial–congressional complex.”
- 31 I have written some fuller remarks on Trump’s legacy in a postscript to the French translation of my book about America; see Mennell ([2022]).
- 32 *Attribution of blame as the past and present means of orientation: the social sciences as a potential improvement*; see Van den Bergh (1978).
- 33 Linklater (2011); and many subsequent books and essays.

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NORBERT ELIAS E A SOCIOLOGIA FIGURACIONAL: UMA ENTREVISTA COM STEPHEN MENNELL

Resumo

Apresentação da entrevista com Stephen Menzell e do conjunto de textos relacionados à Sociologia Figuracional de Norbert Elias que compõem o corrente volume de Sociologia & Antropologia. Na entrevista, Menzell oferece ao leitor um balanço da sociologia figuracional, sua recepção e difusão. Trata, mais especificamente, dos legados de Elias para a sociologia e seu distanciamento em relação à filosofia; da publicação das obras completas de Norbert Elias; de autores que influenciaram Elias; da importância da sociologia do conhecimento e das ciências no conjunto da obra eliasiana; do entendimento dos conceitos de processo da civilização e de descivilização, e de democratização funcional e des-democratização funcional; das aproximações e distanciamentos entre Elias e Bourdieu; finalizando com algumas reflexões sobre o livro *O Processo Civilizador Americano*, publicado por Menzell em 2007, e sobre o uso da sociologia figuracional para o estudo de questões políticas da atualidade.

Palavras-chaves

Norbert Elias;
sociologia figuracional;
sociologia processual;
teoria dos processos
civilizadores.

NORBERT ELIAS AND FIGURATIONAL SOCIOLOGY: AN INTERVIEW WITH STEPHEN MENNELL

Abstract

This is an interview with Stephen Menzell and a set of texts related to Norbert Elias's figurational sociology that make up the current volume of *Sociologia & Antropologia*. Menzell provides readers with a review of figurational sociology, as well as its reception and diffusion. More specifically, he reflects upon Elias's legacies for sociology and his movement away from philosophy; the publication of the collected works of Norbert Elias; authors who influenced Elias; the importance of the sociology of knowledge and the sciences in the body of Elias's work; the understanding of the concepts of civilising and decivilising processes, and functional democratisation and de-democratisation; resemblances and differentiations between Elias and Bourdieu; concluding with some reflections on the book *The American Civilizing Process*, published by Menzell in 2007, and on the use of figurational sociology for the study of current political issues.

Keywords

Norbert Elias;
figurational sociology;
processual sociology
theory of civilizing processes.